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## Social Media, Fandom and Language Learning: A Roundtable with Shannon Sauro and Steven L. Thorne


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## Interview

### Social Media, Fandom and Language Learning: A Roundtable with Shannon Sauro and Steven L. Thorne

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Last November, Dr. Shannon Sauro (Malmö University & Lund University) and Dr. Steven L. Thorne (Portland State University & University of Groningen) visited the UAB campus to give lectures on, respectively, ‘Fandom, Social Media and Learning’ and ‘Human development and semiotic remediation through mobile place-based gaming’. Dr. Sauro’s talk focused on current research on using social media in language learning as well as how task-based language teaching and online media fandoms (e.g. *Sherlock*, *The Hobbit*) may be combined and used as a model for classroom task development and research involving social media. She also covered a new project combining social media and fandom in a course for teacher-educators in Sweden. Dr. Thorne’s lecture drew upon several projects to show how place-based Augmented Reality (AR) experiences can generate and/or expand learning opportunities for language learners outside of the classroom, or ‘in the wild’. Besides discussing the techniques, design, implementation, and evaluation of the projects, he drew attention to the learning outcomes and lessons learned as well as to aligning them with curricular objectives. After the lectures, they both kindly agreed to take part in roundtable of questions and answers and gave permission to be recorded. Questions and responses are transcribed here.

**Question: How do you reconcile the new energy and possibilities of social and online media with more traditional institutional frameworks?**

**DR. SAURO** That’s exactly the question I get asked whenever I talk about fandom. Fandom tasks are generated by people who are passionate about the source material, and I’ve been asked by other teachers and fans, “What if all the students don’t feel that way?” So we’ve kind of played around with ideas of letting them pick the text, letting them pick the task, of allowing a lot more flexibility. So there is a little bit of shoehorning it into an existing framework.

What you’re identifying also are the institutional constraints. We have “constructive alignment”, where you need to make sure that the objectives, the content, and the assessments all align in some way. So when I created this task, we already knew that they had *The Hobbit* as the text. There were actually several texts that we were looking at, maybe *The Hunger Games* or some other things.

We were looking at possible texts, but we were also really restricted by, of course, schools, because Sweden, like most places, has a very careful framework. There are these students’ rights and obligations – we are held to the rights that students have to know what is expected of them. So they’re told in advance by a set curriculum that it takes months to agree

upon, that needs to align with what the Ministry of Education says trainee teachers need to be trained in. So we're constrained by that as well. So the objectives for the course are tied up to that.

We've tried to be creative and taken the approach that analysis can take the form of fiction. Also, in Sweden attendance is not mandatory. You cannot make it mandatory. Students are allowed to challenge a course by just taking an exam and never coming to class. So you have to work within those expectations of knowing that you may have students that never show up. You have to find a way to engage them – and this is where the blog is nice – because some students are never going to come to class, they just plan on turning in the writing and doing their own thing. This is also a way of getting them involved in a sneaky manner and making them collaborate without forcing them to show up and violating their rights. So in some ways, fandom provided a creative solution to some pedagogical problems, but we're still constrained. It is kind of unnatural and it is very frustrating, and every now and again you do think, “What is this God-awful mess that we're doing here?”

**Question:** So how do you assess the outcomes? Does the creativity extend beyond the design, learning, and output to the assessment as well?

**DR. THORNE** Can I respond to this issue? OK, I can think of a couple of things that seem relevant to me. One is to broaden the issue, and that is to think about human development in its most basic state. What contributes to human development? Of whatever kind – mathematics, language learning, it doesn't matter. Large volumes of effortful engagement. That's what results in learning, right? And this is the learning sciences, research, and things like this. That's the single criteria or factor or dynamic that contributes to demonstrable learning outcomes: large volumes of effortful study.

So if we then take that not particularly helpful – it's kind of obvious – if we take that perspective and embed it in a social practice model, we understand that performativity is a huge issue. Who you can perform as or the social performance that you engage in, in any context – for example, sitting across the dinner table from your grandparents, being at a nightclub with an age peer, holding forth in an academic venue, are all very different kinds of social performances. As Johannes Wagner and Alan Firth and others have discussed – their article in particular, the 1997 *Modern Language Journal* [MLJ] article – the flat social ontology of “learner” as an identity disposition is not a particularly developmentally useful one. This has been shown in research again and again.

How do you teach science these days in middle school? I mean, you can teach it poorly, right? But avant-garde, successful, dynamic, early childhood science education involves kids performing as scientists. They're just really bad scientists! [laughs] It's this idea that language learning isn't necessarily oriented, or should not be oriented, for the vast pool of participants in these studies to be good at learning in institutionalized settings. You really have other purposes to which you ought to put this developing communicative practice. So if you think about what we know

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of – again, from the learning sciences – identity dispositions, of who you feel you can be, and the kind of social performances that you’re playing and carrying out, are integral to development and learning.

That’s why I think this interface between fandom or getting students out into the world, the re-‘wilding’ of the rather anemic and thin social identity dispositions that are part and parcel of institutionalized learning, where your student — for example, you know, in the lecture today, Shannon and I were free to walk and we had total control of the floor and none of you stood up and said, “Wait, firstly, you’re boring. Second, I want to talk about what I did last weekend because it’s so much more interesting.” I mean, none of you did that because of the social constraints that were implicit in that environment.

Students are the same: they sit, they’re immobile, and the instructor is moving and makes decisions, the instructor decides the curriculum, the instructor decides the content, oftentimes it’s a wash-back from a high-stakes task that informs all that, as we were talking about. So we have to take that all into account, of course, but also create conditions, by which you could mean enthusiasts, under which you could be an agent from the future doing guerilla reportage on green technology projects while you’re also practicing your Spanish or French or German or whatever it is.

These then provide opportunities for what Engeström and others have called “expansive learning,” where the idea, the object of activity is greater than, say, the mastery – we were talking earlier about, you know, vocabulary acquisition – it’s greater than learning the words necessary to talk about green technology and photovoltaic cells and these sorts of things. It’s about being able to think about those in a way that’s viable for, as a way of pushing off, the environmental degradation of the near future. And you have to use talk and language and coordination and such to do all that. I think this issue of identity, performance, and language learning can be vastly expanded when we think about some opportunities that are presented by new media. More importantly, it’s not the media, it’s the social practices that the media either amplifies — fandom is nothing new, right, that’s what religion is.

You know, we’re in a fandom as a species. So why not leverage some of the dynamism that comes with that as we begin thinking about pedagogical approaches for creating conditions under which you have high volumes of effortful engagement? Which will result in learning.

**Question: What about teachers who don’t have a \$20,000 grant or the technical knowledge or support to develop mobile or online apps?**

**DR. THORNE** Well, the thing about mobile games, though, is it’s not elitist. There’s virtually no technology required. True, it’s elitist in the sense that you need a smartphone, and the reason we chose a small-footprint device, a handheld, is in many student cohorts you’ll find that the majority of people do have some kind of smartphone. So that’s one of the reasons we kind of went that route. Now, the digital divide is alive and well, and there are

haves and have-nots, but that's, I think, consistent across so many contexts in which technology may be relevant.

But the beauty of ARIS, for example – arisgames.org, if you want to look it up online – is that with relatively modest abilities one can actually create and develop mobile games. You can go to arisgames.org and look at the fact sheet and there's an online tutorial and things. These are not computer science majors, these are French majors. That's not something you can do if you're talking about a Duolingo-style environment or certainly not on a massive multiplayer three-dimensionally-rendered avatar-driven environment which takes \$100 million maybe to produce, something like *World of Warcraft*. So this is something that an undergraduate group and I did without any external assistance. And no money. The money came and we haven't spent any of it yet.

That's one of the things I love about this, is the fact that it's a very democratic, openly available, relatively simple to put together kind of approach to the utilization of mobiles for some sort of engaged task or activity-driven learning process that interfaces – again, it could be really conventional language learning materials, if you wish – with actual activity in the world. Again, I want to be clear I'm enthusiastic about this. The science is out, though we still need to do research about whether traditional or conventional classroom activities work either, because the metrics we use to evaluate their success or failure is not very nuanced, is it?

**Question: Speaking of learning processes that interface with actual activity in the world, what about the AR apps where you can go somewhere and learn about the history of the place through the characters or events associated with it? Do they offer anything besides mass appeal?**

**DR. THORNE** That's a great point to show that it isn't just about what we do in terms of the game design or the fandom that exists, it's what we do with it in terms of either structuring access to or pedagogies derived from those activities, or "How do you incorporate them in some sort of wraparound sense?" I wrote a piece with Rebecca Black and Julie Sykes in the 2009 *MLJ*, and at the end we tried to address this issue of, well, OK, it's obvious that event-driven scenarios and online gaming environments produce lots of interaction, lots of language use, lots of negotiation, and lots of sensitive pragmatics. There are all these demonstrable things we can say about language use in those environments but – and this you hear a lot – this is non-standard language, leetspeak, it's people using the "super vernacular" of the Internet lingua franca, which is not a good way to prepare us for an Advanced Placement English exam or TOEFL or something like this.

So I think what we need to think about here are ways in which these activities could be highly convergent with learning outcomes, narrowly defined – epistemological prescriptivism lives large and well in the academy – by high-stakes tests. I think fan fiction is, for example, a great way to focus in on a narrow genre, the genre of creative writing. I had a student develop a whole pedagogy on this. Some of them would write a fan fiction, and then someone else would have to read that fan fiction as though

it was something they actually saw and experienced, and write an expository prose newspaper article about the fan fiction text. So you have this sort of mixing of genres and you're saying, drudgery can be OK. Don't worry, it doesn't all have to be just fun and glib.

We can actually have students do hard school-like work associated with social media, fandom, online games, augmented reality games, and that's not the end of the world, it doesn't totally kill it. And if it does, we can revitalize it by giving them some more unfettered time in these environments, if we think it's developmentally useful enough. But I think we need to think about convergent dynamics and convergent kinds of language use like the genre of language that's very appropriate for high-stakes tasks, for passing a fourth-year English program at a university or the kinds of things that might simply be language learning in the wild that attune you to the kinds of communicative dynamics you might actually need and want.

I think Shannon brought this up and it's a very important point. I have a number of case studies of individuals who are studying Chinese, Korean, and Russian at university, this was at Penn State, so that they could play *World of Warcraft* with guilds that are comprised primarily of players who speak those languages natively. That's why they're sitting in your foreign language classroom. Now, I'm not saying you have *World of Warcraft* 101 for Russian or whatever, but what I am saying is that social media and fandom aren't just a way to think about another language, they're actually the catalyst for some people to want to learn a language to begin with.

I'm sure Shannon has a lot more to say about that, but I really think that's a dynamic people sort of gloss over: "Oh, well, there's this sort of Labovian, stigmatized linguistic variety that's spoken in fandom or in gaming circles." Maybe that's the case, but the stigma is a socially-constructed stigma. If any of you really care about this and want to be bored to tears – crying you're so bored, really – you can look at a 2012 publication that I did with a couple of colleagues where we actually did a linguistic complexity analysis of gaming discourse. We found that, in fact, morphosyntactically it was massively complex; lexical richness, massively complex. Now, you can say you don't like it still, that's fine, it doesn't have to be your language. But to say it's too simple or not interesting or inappropriate because it's sort of beneath the level of complexity that would warrant attention by a literary scholar or whatever, that is simply an act of prejudice. And that's OK, but be aware of your prejudice. It's OK to not like something. It's not OK to say it's simple when it's not.

The reason I say it's Labovian is, this was the same charge against black English vernacular – what's sometimes called African-American Vernacular English – "it's a simplistic linguistic variety that is incapable of true human expression and nuanced emotion" and all these sorts of things. Of course, Labov showed, using traditional sociolinguistic variationist analysis, that in fact it was as complex, as highly structured, as consistent. The other thing, "it's loosey-goosey, you do whatever you want" – no, there's nothing about the 'super vernacular' of the online gaming kinds of language use that is "loosey-goosey, do whatever you want."

Communication doesn't work very well that way. You need to be consistent across contexts, across interlocutors. There can be variability, there are lots of languages in the world, of course there can be variability. There can also be rapid language change, neologisms, and innovations, but we do things in particular kinds of ways because that's the way communication functions. We do, in fact, the same thing a lot. We innovate very rarely, when we think about it, in terms of language.

**DR. SAURO** I'm going to build on what you're saying right now because I'm feeling very, very inspired. One of the things that comes out —

**DR. THORNE** Why, thank you!

**DR. SAURO** — You get on a roll and it gets my thoughts going. But we were talking before about institutional constraints, about social constraints, prejudices and attitudes. One of the other things that I'm also implicitly teaching by drawing upon fandom is there's something in language policy called implementational space, where you can look at the policy and find a way to interpret it or find room to do what you know will work better in your classroom than those policymakers understood when they put that stuff together. This is something we see going on, for example, in bilingual education or ESL instruction in different states in the US in response to No Child Left Behind, which provides a lot of constraints.

But when you look at a fandom, it's also a nice model for showing teachers – and I'm training teachers by doing this – alternate ways to go about doing things and finding implementational space to do that. A big part of fandom, it's not just passion, it's also talking back to power, so it's a transgressive act. So it's almost a violent act when you take a text, this canonical text, and you go, "You know what? I am going to flip it on its head because I am so disappointed with the writer." You have people who are really upset.

There's a lot of passion in the *Sherlock* fandom about the sexuality of the characters. They saw that the John-Sherlock relationship in the television show was often read as very homosexual, and it's never materialized. You have others who have read it heavily as asexual, that Sherlock is an asexual character. These are relationships and characters that we don't see well represented in the media. So you have a lot of people who take fan fiction, who take discussion, who do art as a way to produce more media that doesn't exist sufficiently through the dominant media. So what they're doing is critique by re-interpreting, re-appropriating, and pushing it back. And they're doing it in all sorts of ways, whether you're swapping the characters, whether you're altering their sexuality, whether you are bringing somebody back from the dead. I mean, a lot of that is dissatisfaction with the source and it's a way to say, "You know what? We're going to do it better." And some of that stuff is a lot better.

You have thousands of people worrying about how Sherlock Holmes survived jumping off a building. They're coming up with more creative solutions collaboratively than the two writers who are paid to write the show. So through using fandom as a model for a simple pedagogical task, I'm implicitly helping to teach subversion in teaching. That is an element I

want to pull out of it more, that is a belief in my training of teachers. Looking at gaming, or if you look at things that are socially stigmatized and then you start to analyze why, “Why is this language a problem?” Like we see with research on AAVE, we can see the fallout of these negative beliefs about African-American Vernacular English and how that has negatively impacted students when you have this prejudice. So I think I see the use of these materials as a model for training teachers on how to find that wiggle room so we’re not so constrained by the assessments and the dominant discourse of, “This is what you have to do and this is what learning looks like.”

**DR. THORNE** That’s a great comment. So one thing we might do, then, if we weren’t teachers – because we were talking about teacher professional development – but we also have to look at student development, don’t we? What’s the difference in genre at the level of morphosyntactic realizations? What’s the difference between using gamer language to negotiate this kind of pragmatic issue versus the type of thing you might expect in a traditional English grammar book? Analyze those differences, understand those differences and you’re a long way toward being able to produce them when the context calls for it.

If you do certain things in a gaming environment that doesn’t reflect that speech culture and community, you’re really a fish out of water, just as – and some of you may get a student, those who teach undergraduates, for example – you may get sort of text-message style emails, and you’ll think, “Oh my God, that person really needs a lesson in how to send a note to a professor.” “yo dude” – all lower case – “can’t cum 2 class, catch u l8r.” It’s not so great, right? You might be a little bit more obsequious, please.

So, anyway, I just bring this up, one of the things that Jon Reinhardt and I have been developing is pedagogic, called bridging activities, which is endorsing vernacular literacy and vernacular linguistic varieties because that’s where the life of language sits. It really is. Then learn how to differentiate that and make important decisions about how you wish to communicate based on your ability to parse apart these different communicative styles and genres, and then make the right choice based on context, based on interlocutor relationship, based on if you want people to take you seriously or not. You could be the best theoretician in the world and if you don’t have the right way of packaging it in academic discourse, in writing, or in speech, then you won’t be taken seriously.

It’s as though communicative content and form are not the same thing. They are the same thing, they’re absolutely unified. Or, maybe, I’ll admit that there’s a slight sort of Venn diagram, but there’s almost complete overlap. But form is content. Absolutely, at the level of genre, genre specificity, and becoming sensitive to when to use leetspeak and gamer language, and when to use more formal linguistic varieties or registers as are relevant to the communicative task at hand.



**Question: On choosing between linguistic varieties, what do you do about language learners who are doing a task or playing a game that is much easier to accomplish in their native language than in the L2, which is, in a way, an obstacle in the path to their goal?**

**DR. THORNE** Well, that's the case with small-group work in the classroom, too, isn't it? If you have students doing small-group work, they may or may not be doing it in the target language. If you have a task that involves recording yourself and it's supposed to be in English, you have this one little moment at least. But it could be that you restructure the task, you have to interact with your friend and collaboratively produce some sort of narrative about whatever you're seeing or trying to understand historically or whatever the situation might be. And the requirement is that you do it in English. You could also maybe have them do that task in their strong language, whatever that is, and also in a target language at different times or possibly you could have a mixed-code contract, I'm not sure. I haven't thought about how pedagogically that would work. But it'd be easy to have your students do podcasts, by the way.

**DR. SAURO** But maybe the issue is audience. So if they're going out and they're gaming, they're going to do it in Catalan, if there was some reason, there's a product that's going to be shared with students in Sweden, they're not going to understand your Catalan —

**DR. THORNE** Yeah.

**DR. SAURO** — so you have to do that in English because of something. So it's almost like you give them an audience, it's like the teacher in the classroom is the audience for whom they perform that language. So when you're going outside —

**Question: But why would somebody in Sweden want to listen to the conversation of two Catalan students?**

**DR. SAURO** They actually find it natural in Sweden, which is something that I find very interesting, Sweden is a very externally focused country. They are different with respect to language skills, they're very much about using English orally, though they need help with the writing. Go to a museum somewhere in Europe, and you're going to see all the maps and languages, but there's not going to be any Swedish anywhere. They know it has to be in English, so the idea of hearing other people doing things in English is a window on the world for them because they're kind of stuck up there. When you're in Sweden you'll often be asked, "Why come here?" So they're externally focused. It might be an issue of what is relevant and realistic to your learners and coming to it from what I know my learners would be interested in because of their social context. So here, it's a different one.

**Question:** So to use these media for learning, we would need a native speaker to work with a learner, or two learners who are externally focused from different countries?

**DR. THORNE** Well, one of the things we're trying to figure out is a telecollaboration model where you'd get a city tour, like you'd have the coolest things about Malmö and the coolest things about here and the students – we're doing this already with an urban studies program at Portland State University – where students just post YouTube videos of themselves in front of something, talking about some aspect of the urban environment in this case. But there's no reason why you couldn't have students, you know, Catalan-speaking students who are interested in learning English, as a language required for communication, talk about the many fascinating, wonderful things – that at least I've perceived to be fascinating and wonderful here in Barcelona – and then, you could share this back and forth.

That would be a really interesting form of partnership and one of the things that we have built into all our games is you can quick-travel, so you can actually do all of the activities without leaving your room, if you want. And if you need to do that for pedagogical purposes, we also have physically-disabled participants in our class who can't get out and walk around because maybe they're in a wheelchair or whatever. So we need to do this anyway just so everyone can participate. But the idea of being able then to use quick-travel, you can actually create an AR game that's a tour or provokes some sort of interesting thing, like hey, you have to describe whatever it is because you're in a place. Or maybe you have a corresponding set of images that appear on a player's screen that would allow them to kind of virtually place themselves. And then they could do the task or they could see how you did the task, and then they could do the same in Malmö or wherever. There are all types of interesting ways to do some of this telecollaborative or online cultural exchange work that might have an AR game component. I think that would be a really interesting thing to explore.

**Question:** Any final thoughts or nuggets of wisdom?

**DR. THORNE** ...Shannon? *[laughs]*

**DR. SAURO** That's a tall order. I'm going to wrap up by coming back to the point about empowerment because I see fandom activities and, I think, gaming as alternate approaches to teaching. One of the things that I value in fandom, like I was saying, was talking back to the dominant discourses, but it's also providing alternatives. So when we're questioning which is the correct tool or somebody is trying to force me to use a game and I don't feel comfortable about that in my teaching, I don't argue for that. I think this is just an additional option, and I think having choices in teaching is a way to empower the teachers, but also to better facilitate learning and a better reflection of what we use language for. It's not just taking a test or reading and writing, it's all these other things, too. My final thought.

**DR. THORNE** Ibid. *[laughs]* No, I mean, really, that sums up things really nicely. There have been critics of formal institutionalized education who've called classroom – and for that matter, institutional and university settings – who've called them 'spaces of incarceration', for example. Pierre Bourdieu, my favorite French sociologist – Who doesn't have a favorite French sociologist? Everyone must. *[laughs]* Pierre Bourdieu is mine. – talked about the symbolic violence of schooling because of the epistemological prescriptivism of these settings: there's a right and a wrong, a good and a bad, it's received from on high, it's not crowd-sourced, it's not organically emergent of the community or life experience, it's something you either get or don't get, and you're judged for that.

So, one of the things I would want to push for, that I think technology has the potential to help with – and I shouldn't say technology, again, it's really the social practices and the relationships that are re-mediated in technology that it may make possible – is this idea of epistemological pluralism, this idea of the possibility of having, from a student's perspective, this idea of being able to articulate some agentivity, of being able to make some choices, being able to leverage life passions and commitments in the context of an academic field or learning a new language or what have you.

I think commensurate with that is this idea of identity dispositions, and the idea of performing certain kinds of social identities, and making "student" one of those identities, but not the only one that we emphasize and make possible in these settings. Let me say as a caveat, that's a tough thing to do. One of the biggest resistant communities to any innovative pedagogy that I've been involved in trying and putting out as an intervention? Students. Students sometimes are the biggest, the ones from whom I get the biggest pushback. Not from other faculty, not from the chair of my department, but it's from the students themselves, who want business as usual. They've been sitting in chairs, by the time they get to university, thirteen years in the United States. They know exactly what they need to do, they know how to do it, and they want to be efficient.

This is the result of the penetration of capitalism and exchange-value ontologies that then, I think, destroy opportunities for deep and substantive learning sometimes. So we need to think about revisiting that and making social relationships and opportunities for the development of use value at the fore. At least, sometimes. I understand that we have high-stakes tasks and other things we need to attend to. But I think that sometimes these new media social processes can help with that and they warrant our continued attention.

**Author references:**

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